

# Seattle University program hopes to foster a more civil society, one student at a time

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**Could we all be a little more civil to one another? A new scholarship program at Seattle University aims to nurture civil-minded leaders.**

By [Katherine Long](#)

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Could we all be just a little more civil to each other?

Given the tenor of the presidential primaries, Paula Lustbader thinks a dose of civility is what the country needs — and has needed for some time. The election's heated rhetoric is the latest example of an uncivil attitude that she believes is undermining our physical and mental health, even our quality of life.

The retired Seattle University law-school professor has made it her life's work to inject a dose of civility into the legal profession. Now, she wants to bring those lessons to undergraduates, too.

Her family foundation is funding a unique program that aims to nurture a small group of community-college transfer students at the Jesuit school — a program that will stress the importance of civility, in hopes that those students will become leaders in their fields, spreading civility as they go.

It will be a small program — with just 15 students a year. But it's one more way to foster a more civil society. When incivility rears its ugly head, Lustbader says, the topic at hand “is no longer about the substance of the problem we're trying to solve, or the work we're trying to generate or the people we're trying to serve.”

“Civility is not a sign of weakness,” she said. “It's finding ways to be your most effective and effecting change.”

In the new scholarship program, called Alfie's Scholars, the 15 scholarship winners will each receive \$10,000 from the Lustbader family foundation each year, in addition to financial aid they receive from Seattle University and other sources. The total is expected to be enough to almost fully cover the costs of their bachelor's degrees. The program starts this August, and is funded in perpetuity.

The scholarship is named after Paula's father, Alfred Lustbader, a commercial real estate developer. The family focus on civility goes back to Lustbader's paternal grandmother, Charlotte (Lottie) Lustbader, who raised Alfred and his brother Robert in Brooklyn during the Depression and taught them the importance of the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) and the obligation to help others, especially those who are less fortunate.

Lustbader's family has been providing civility training to the legal profession since 2008, when the family created [Robert's Fund](#), named after Robert Lustbader (Paula's uncle) for continuing education seminars for lawyers, judges and mediators.

And several judges say they've seen a change in attitude among attorneys who have gone through the training.

To transfer this training into an undergraduate education, the university is seeking a diverse group of scholars from disadvantaged backgrounds who demonstrate grit and resiliency, said Carol Cochran, the full-time director of Alfie's Scholars. The scholarships will be awarded this spring.

Studies show, Lustbader said, that when people are exposed to mild rudeness before sitting down to a task — even if the rudeness is not directed at them — they're less capable of completing that task and more predisposed to anti-social tendencies.

"It has this really insidious effect," she said.

Mary Yu, a state Supreme Court justice and former King County Superior Court judge, said she's noticed more kindness and courtesy among attorneys who have gone through civility training.

“I don’t think anybody consciously wants to be mean,” she said. “If you can get people to pause and reset for 30 seconds ...”

Former King County Prosecutor Craig Sims said the harm of incivility became clear to him in 2005, when he was one of two prosecutors who handled the case of [William Joice](#), an attorney who attempted to murder a rival attorney, Kevin Jung, over a legal dispute.

“This whole tragedy occurred because of the way lawyers were treating each other,” Sims said.

He has been through the Roberts Fund civility training, and says it has influenced his life. “I’m mindful now of the language I use,” he said. “If there is a tense argument, what can I do to de-escalate it?” It’s even been a helpful parenting skill, and he uses some of its tenets to resolve issues with his children.

How do you teach civility?

“It’s partially communication, partially leadership, partially accountability,” said another state Supreme Court justice, Mary Fairhurst, who has participated in the programs. In part, she said, it’s good manners, “but I think it’s so much more than that. It’s a whole philosophy about how you move through the world and what kind of person you are.”

Lustbader and her fellow instructors make their case for civility by showing that rude behavior has an economic cost in the legal world.

They cite a study that examined an especially condescending lawyer and how he affected the economics of his firm’s practice. Although he was considered a rainmaker, his behavior caused a dozen lawyers and paralegals to leave over several years, at a cost to the firm of millions of dollars in hiring and training, to say nothing of the loss of reputation in the community, Lustbader said.

Studies show stress, anxiety and depression increase dramatically in an uncivil environment. “Motivation, attachment to the company, morale — all of that goes down if you have incivility,” she said.

Once they've made the economic case, the Roberts Fund instructors teach participants how to become aware of their own emotional well-being, and how their behavior affects other people.

They emphasize the importance of using creativity to solve legal problems, seeking alternative solutions.

And they emphasize the importance of building community. The idea taps into a South African concept, "[ubuntu](#)," the idea that humans are dependent on one another, and "I can only be the best I can be when you're the best you can be," Lustbader said.

To turn these concepts into training for undergraduates, the new scholarship requires all participants to take two philosophy courses, and a two-credit seminar on leadership and fostering civility.

But perhaps most important, the students will take many classes together, moving through their two years at Seattle University as their own community.

The program's design is informed by the success of another program at Seattle University that Lustbader co-founded, a law school program that admits diverse, nontraditional students who show great promise but who don't have the grades or test scores to make them law school shoo-ins.

"Whatever our work is, and whatever our personal lives are, we'll be much more effective — we'll do it much more efficiently — if we can do it with an ounce of civility," she said.

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